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SUBJECT: MARSEILLE SPARED URBAN UNREST DURING RECENT RIOTS: WHY?

[1](#)1. Summary: Multiethnic and multiracial Marseille, home to about 200,000 Muslims, and one of the poorest cities in France, was largely spared the unrest that shook France in November. Why? Precisely because Marseille is a poor, multi-racial city, where the poor live in the center of town and not in the suburbs. Marseille's municipality and civil society are also un-French in that they acknowledge the existence of religious and ethnic communities, and have put together mechanisms to interact with them. The result is a city that has a remarkable ability to absorb immigrants and handle poverty. It is of course not paradise. This region is after all the home to many strongholds of the racist Front National Party. However, the "Marseille exception" is real, and will fuel debate about the "French Integration Model" in the coming months. End Summary.

[1](#)2. GEOGRAPHY MATTERS. OR: THERE IS A REASON IT IS CALLED "THE PANIER"

One of the oldest districts of Marseille is called the Panier, or "basket", because it is hemmed in by the sea on one side, and the hills that form Marseille's outer limits on the other. Waves of immigrants over the years have poured into this "basket", producing a mixture of race and heritage rarely found in French city centers. Once mainly Corsican, now heavily North African, and recently home to a growing Chinatown, the Panier is just one of many similar neighborhoods in Marseille. This port city has for centuries been a destination for immigrants and asylum seekers. Hence you don't find in Marseille the disaffected suburban populations feeling outcast from the city center. Numerous immigrants interviewed about the lack of riots cited this sense of geographic belonging in their answers. As one woman from North Africa told the Washington Post, "We have our troubles, but I can go to the center of the city without thinking I am entering enemy territory. We belong to Marseille and Marseille belongs to us."

[1](#)3. COMMUNITIES ARE ACKNOWLEDGED

As several recent articles have noted, Marseille is very un-French in that it freely acknowledges the many religious-based communities that make up the tissue of the city, and have developed municipal and civic mechanisms to interact with them. A typical example is "Marseille-Esperance" a municipal innovation created in the 1990s. It is a consultative council of religious leaders representing the major religions in Marseille that meets with the Mayor on an ad hoc basis and receives some office space from the city. The importance of this organization is as a symbol of unity and belonging, and it has played a role in maintaining social peace during times of tension.

[1](#)4. COMMUNITIES ARE ORGANIZED

On November 17 CG attended a "dinner of sharing" offered by the Muslim association CORAI (Committee for Islamic Thought and Action) for close

to 1,000 representatives of the local government and civil society. It was held in a banquet hall across the street from the Velodrome, where Olympique Marseille plays, and bears witness to the most organized soccer fan base in France. This evokes the thick web of local associations that lace through the poor quarters of Marseille. Associations such as "Jeunes Errants"; "Tolerance Esclavage Zero"; "Femmes d'ici et d'ailleurs"; "Ni Putes, ni soumises" and "Observatoire pour la Non-violence", are all very active on the ground and confirm that they worked hard to prevent violence. The President of the "Observatoire pour la Non-violence" described the concept of what he calls the "House of Marseille" saying that the youth of poor neighborhoods feel like Marseille is their home, and thus don't feel the desire to despoil it. However, others, such as "Ni Putes, ni soumises" caution that the situation is still explosive, and in many cases is held in check not by the police, but by the leaders of the parallel economy, the celebrated "caids" of Marseille.

15. WE ARE ALL IN THE SAME BOAT

Marseille is still and has always been a poor city. Unemployment is higher than the national average, and 5 percent of the population receives the RMI (long term unemployment benefits). Hence traditions of solidarity are strong here. As one sociologist was quoted as saying in the local paper, "We share everything in Marseille: Poverty, OM (Olympic Marseille soccer team) and the beach." The rise of Marseille as a trendy city, with the arrival of the TGV and the Euromediterranean redevelopment project has not yet changed the strong traditions of solidarity that help new immigrants make their way.

16. WE KNOW HOW TO KEEP THE LID ON

To a certain degree, Marseille was spared because it has a long history of dealing with delinquent behavior, and has a surveillance network in place that works. For example, during the height of the riots, police were able to stop an attempt to pillage a Marseille shopping mall because they had prior notice, and were deployed in strength when the bandits arrived. The Prefect de Police, Bernard Squarcini, has a background in intelligence, and puts a lot of emphasis on good intelligence so that trouble can be anticipated. He told Ambassador Stapleton during a recent meeting that because the local police maintain good contacts, he was able to deploy his forces in such a way as to stop trouble before it started. It is also true that the parallel economy run out of some of the poorer housing projects has an interest in maintaining order as well, and has traditionally been tolerated to a degree not found in the North. Local association contacts thought this was a large factor in the lack of violence. Comment: Given the results of Squarcini's methods, it is not surprising that he was recently asked by Interior Minister Sarkozy to return to Paris. For the moment, he is resisting these calls. However, it sounds like Squarcini has been using the community policing methods that the Minister of Interior has been criticized for neglecting.

17. CAN FRANCE LEARN FROM MARSEILLE?

Many will point to Marseille in the coming weeks as the "French Model of Integration" is debated. Whether or not parts of the Marseille experience can be exported to other parts of France is certainly open to question. The things that make Marseille different are also the things people often cite when they say Marseille is in some way

not very
French. However, at the very least, the emphasis Marseille
places on
conscious interaction with religious and ethnic communities
suggests
that there is a way for France to modify the unitary, "we are
all
French" model of integration without betraying the ideals of
French
society.
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